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The Growth and Importance of
the Cornell Dante Collection



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*The Growth & Importance of the
Cornell Dante Collection*

By THEODORE WESLEY KOCH

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SOME DANTE TREASURES UNDER LOCK AND KEY.



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THE GROWTH AND IMPORTANCE OF THE
CORNELL DANTE COLLECTION.



IN May, 1894, when Professor Crane gave in the *CORNELL MAGAZINE* some account of the Dante Collection which in the preceding year Mr. Willard Fiske had brought together and presented to Cornell University, the bound volumes on the shelves numbered about 3,000,—certainly a very remarkable number of works on one author to be gathered in so short a time. A finding-list was then in course of preparation. Today the collection numbers nearly 7,000 separately bound volumes and there is about to be published an annotated bibliographical catalogue in two large octavo volumes, each of three hundred closely printed two-column pages. By the publication of its catalogue this collection will be made useful to the students of the country at large.

It is difficult to give the reader who has not delved into the literature of Dante an adequate idea of the size and richness of the Fiske Collection. Its book-plate aptly styles it as a "biblioteca dantesca." It is indeed a veritable library in itself and one of no mean size. Perhaps the statement that the manuscript card catalogue covered more than 25,000 library cards of the regulation size (3 x 5 inches) will convey some idea as to the extent of the collection and the amount of work required to catalogue it on the rather minute and laborious plan adopted some four years ago. Of the Italian text of the *Divina Commedia*, complete and

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incomplete, there are some 460 editions in this collection, exclusive of those entered under "Selections" and omitting also most of the texts contained in works about Dante. Translations of Dante's masterpiece by 303 different hands and into twenty-five languages and eleven dialects of Italy are found here. The best argument for this multitude of translations is that given on the title-page of Bridel's letter on the manner of translating Dante: "Duo dum faciunt idem, non est idem." "Plus on étudie le Dante," says M. Mesnard in the preface to his own translation, "plus on admire la puissance de son génie ; et, à mesure qu'on l'admire davantage, la séduction devient plus forte de reproduire, dans un autre idiome, les beautés, encore si neuves, de la Divine Comédie. Toute version, paraît incomplète, infidèle, et chacun porte en soi, selon sa manière de sentir, le besoin d'une traduction nouvelle." It would seem useless to hope for a final translation of a foreign classic into any of the living tongues.

Many happy circumstances united to enable Mr. Fiske to amass this wonderful collection. Chief among these were his long experience both as a librarian and as a private collector, his residence of many years in Italy with frequent trips to the various European book-marts, his knowledge of the best methods of hunting down rare books and his ability to pay for them, all combined with a systematic and enthusiastic devotion to the work. A striking illustration of the completeness of his collection is the number of forms in which many of the articles on Dante are to be had. Frequently you will find there a particular magazine article extracted bodily from the number in which it appeared, then a separate reprint, "deprint," "Abdruck," or whatever you prefer to call it, and if the article has been included in any of the author's collected writings you may generally count upon Mr. Fiske's having secured the volume in question. Still further, if it has been translated into some other language, the translation has been sought out and usually secured. And where the quest for any of these

later forms has failed, the cataloguer has taken upon himself the task of noting that such a reprint or translation of a particular work has been published, thus filling out the bibliographical history of the various items as far as practicable. Another remarkable thing about the collection is the enormous number of clippings preserved in scrap-books. They have been cut from magazines and newspapers and embrace original articles, reviews and polemics, running sometimes through half a dozen numbers of a periodical. Both the scrap-books and their pages being numbered, these clippings are as easily catalogued and as accessible as if they were lengthy articles, separately bound, with distinct shelf-numbers. Then, too, there are portfolios of various sizes for loose portraits of Dante and illustrations to his works, a photograph album for Italian views associated with Dante's memory, and letter-books for the preservation of general correspondence connected with the making of the collection. That the books were brought together by an enthusiastic collector is evidenced by the remarkably large number of autograph copies, to say nothing of inserted letters from the authors. These letters contain much information which had not yet found its way into the bibliographies; they have frequently been drawn upon in making the catalogue of the collection.

The aim of the Cornell Dante Catalogue is necessarily bibliographical rather than critical. Yet by means of the notes quoted from various authoritative writers, and by referring to the numerous reviews entered under the books, one can easily arrive at the received estimate of a work of any importance. The cataloguer's business was to enter everything which came to him bearing in any way on Dante. Those who think like the reviewer of Petzholdt's "*Bibliographia dantea*" in the *Athenæum* for Sept. 13, 1880, that a work "On the Syntax and Style of the Predecessors of Dante" has but little more right to an entry in a Dante bibliography than Southey's "Doctor" to a place in a medical library, can find much to cavil at in the breadth of sub-

jects covered in this collection. Those, however, who have had much to do with Dante literature know how diverse are the questions which have grown up both about him and his work, how as the foremost representative of his time he is again and again singled out for analysis as the embodiment of mediæval thought on the greatest variety of topics. As far back as the sixteenth century the universality of the subjects into the service of which Dante had been pressed for purposes of elucidation and illustration was epitomized by Benedetto Varchi in his remark : " Dicendo Dante, mi pare, insieme con questo nome, dire ogni cosa." Florentine chronicles and histories, manuals of Italian literature and miscellaneous material illustrating Dante's life and themes are included in this collection. Dante has been rightly spoken of as one of the three most elastic subjects,—the other two being the Bible and man's conscience.

The value of much of the bibliographical work that has been done on Dante by Italians and Germans has been lessened by the inexcusable practice of translating and even paraphrasing the titles of books in languages foreign to the compiler.* The aim of the Cornell Catalogue is to give the titles as they are found on the books themselves, no matter whether they be in Hungarian, Polish, Russian, Slovenian, or some other language with which the cataloguer can hardly be expected to be on terms of easiest familiarity. The quaint and obsolete spelling of the older books is retained, and, whatever has been added to the titles by the cataloguer is

* This is true, for example, of the "Bibliografia alfabetica" in Scartazzini's "Dante in Germania," 1881-83, and of Jaccarino's "Biblioteca dantesca," 1893, where all the German titles are translated into Italian. In the latter work we also find Miss Sayer's translation of the "Banquet" (Il Convito) entered as the "Bouquet" of Dante Alighieri, Hasenclever becomes Balenclever, Kopisch becomes Hopisch, etc. How can one use such a catalogue as a check list? It requires either an extraordinary ability at guessing the real names of the authors, or a perfect familiarity with the bibliography of the subject, and in any case an inordinate amount of patience.

bracketed and in English. It is hoped that the pains taken with the proof-reading of the Cornell Catalogue have reduced the number of inaccurate transcriptions to a minimum. I know how annoying it is to find English titles recorded as carelessly as they are in Ferrazzi's "Manuale dantesco." I trust that Italians will not meet with the same annoyance in consulting Italian titles in my work.

Some students of Dante have felt that the presence of a large collection of books on the subject was a check on investigation (or at least on the publication of their own views about this or that matter) and so defeated its own ends. "One sometimes asks one's self, in moments of despondency," says Mr. Irving Babbitt in the *Atlantic Monthly* for March 1897, "whether the main achievement of the nineteenth century will not have been to accumulate a mass of machinery that will break the twentieth century's back. The Harvard College library already contains, for the special study of Dante alone, over eighteen hundred volumes;* about three-fourths of which, it may be remarked in passing, are nearly or quite worthless, and only tend to the confusion of good counsel. Merely to master the special apparatus for the study of Dante and his times, the student, if he conforms to the standard set for the modern specialist, will run the risk of losing his intellectual symmetry and sense of proportion, precisely the qualities of which he will stand most in need for the higher interpretation of Dante." The

* The Harvard Dante Collection must now number in the neighborhood of 2,500 volumes. It is unfair to compare the Harvard and Cornell Collections by their respective volume numbers, inasmuch as Harvard has been in the habit of binding together a number of pamphlets by one author or on one topic, while in the Fiske Collection the great majority of the items are bound separately, no matter what their size. Moreover, many volumes of miscellaneous essays and the like, bought by Mr. Fiske because they contained something on Dante, have been placed on the Cornell Dante shelves, while the same volumes at Harvard might be found scattered throughout the library according as to where they best fitted into the general scheme of classification in vogue at that institution.

position here taken is somewhat akin to that of the Italian priest, Matteo Romani, who in his 1864 edition of the *Commedia* remarked "che per correggere la Divina Commedia non occorrono testi, ma teste." But only by fresh and continual expounding of Dante can we bring him to the attention of the ever changing reading public. What are the majority of books on Aristotle and Plato but rehabilitations of time-worn facts? Yet these old truths, when dressed up anew, reach a new audience of people who might otherwise remain totally unacquainted with them. Many of the books in the Fiske Collection have undoubtedly had their day, and having served their purpose, great or humble as it may have been, are now of value only as records of the methods of interpreting Dante to previous generations. Other items in abundance are but bibliographical curiosities, serving only to elucidate the literary history of some expounder of Dante, or the fortune of Dante's own works in the world of type and paper.

If it were true that great bibliographical collections are but bewildering to the student, then the British Museum, the storehouse of some of the greatest collections in the world, should form the most confusing of literary workshops. But in how many authors' prefaces have we seen the opposite testimony! Hundreds of scholars have gladly paid their tribute to the wise and generous management of the English national depository of books from which they have received the greatest benefit, indeed without the enjoyment of which they would have been compelled to hunt in dozens of scattered libraries for the literature of their various subjects and even then would have missed the priceless advantage of having had the works simultaneously at hand, to compare and weigh them one against another. The truth is that the *great* library is a source of joy or of despair according as to how the investigator is disposed toward his work. If he is a man of vitality and discriminating powers he will not be daunted by the presence of the proportionately large part of the literature of his



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subject which he never hopes nor wants to look into ; he will know how to choose his reading and will be able to separate the wheat from the chaff without threshing the whole stack. If, on the contrary, he does not know exactly what he wants, or is in doubt as to how to go about his investigations, then he had better do his reading in some small library in which the books have been collected of necessity on some eclectic or critical principle. Some readers will never learn to distinguish for themselves the useless from the valuable, the sentimental and æsthetical outpourings of a dilettante from the results of scholarship and critical research.

Illustrating this brief article about the collection will be found two views of corners in the library stack where the books are housed. These illustrations will give some idea of what I have tried to do to relieve the harshness of iron floors and fire-proof construction. When I first assumed charge of the collection it seemed to me rather a pity that books having such a claim on lovers of literature and art should have such dismally bare surroundings. There was no inviting place near the books themselves where the visitor to the collection could consult them and keep in touch with anything poetical. There was a prosaic lack of any indication of the presence of this wealth of material on one of the great world poets. The collection suffered for the want of such accommodations as those given to the books of Ex-President White. No separate room was available for the Fiske Collection, and, moreover, its classification as one division of Italian literature almost necessitated its being kept near the general subject of Romance literature. So, making the best of these circumstances, I thought of hanging a few portraits of Dante on the walls of the stack and at the ends of the book-presses. Then I added a few portrait busts and reproductions of some of the more interesting pictures inspired by Dante's life and works. The acquisition of Hollyer's fine platinotype copies of the paintings by Rossetti made me question the advisability of

putting them away in portfolios where they would be rarely seen; and so they were added to the collection of framed pictures. Eventually the latter included fifty-six pieces. A visitor to the library, whose pictorial ideas concerning Dante had apparently been derived from Doré's illustrations to the *Inferno*, admired these illustrations of a very different kind and remarked: "Why, I always thought Dante pictures were terrible, but these are not at all so!" For the benefit of such visitors I have compiled a hand-list of these framed portraits and pictures, giving in guide-book style some elementary information about the originals and the episodes upon which they are based.

It is, of course, to be understood that this is not a representative collection of art about Dante. Many things which I should like to have seen on the walls were not procurable in the form of separate reproductions suitable for framing. Botticelli, for example, ought certainly to be found in a collection aiming to give a fair representation of the "poetical in art" about Dante. But although Botticelli's drawings have been excellently reproduced, they are not to be had singly. The entire series can be found in portfolio and book form on the shelves of the Fiske Collection. The catalogue of the latter contains an appendix of some thirty pages on the general subject of Iconography. Besides lists of reproductions of portraits and pictorial illustrations, this division also enumerates examples of "Sculpture relating to Dante," "Monuments and Statues," "Early Italian Art as illustrative of the *Divina Commedia*," and "Reproductions from Manuscripts." The resources of the entire University Library have been drawn upon for the enrichment of these lists.

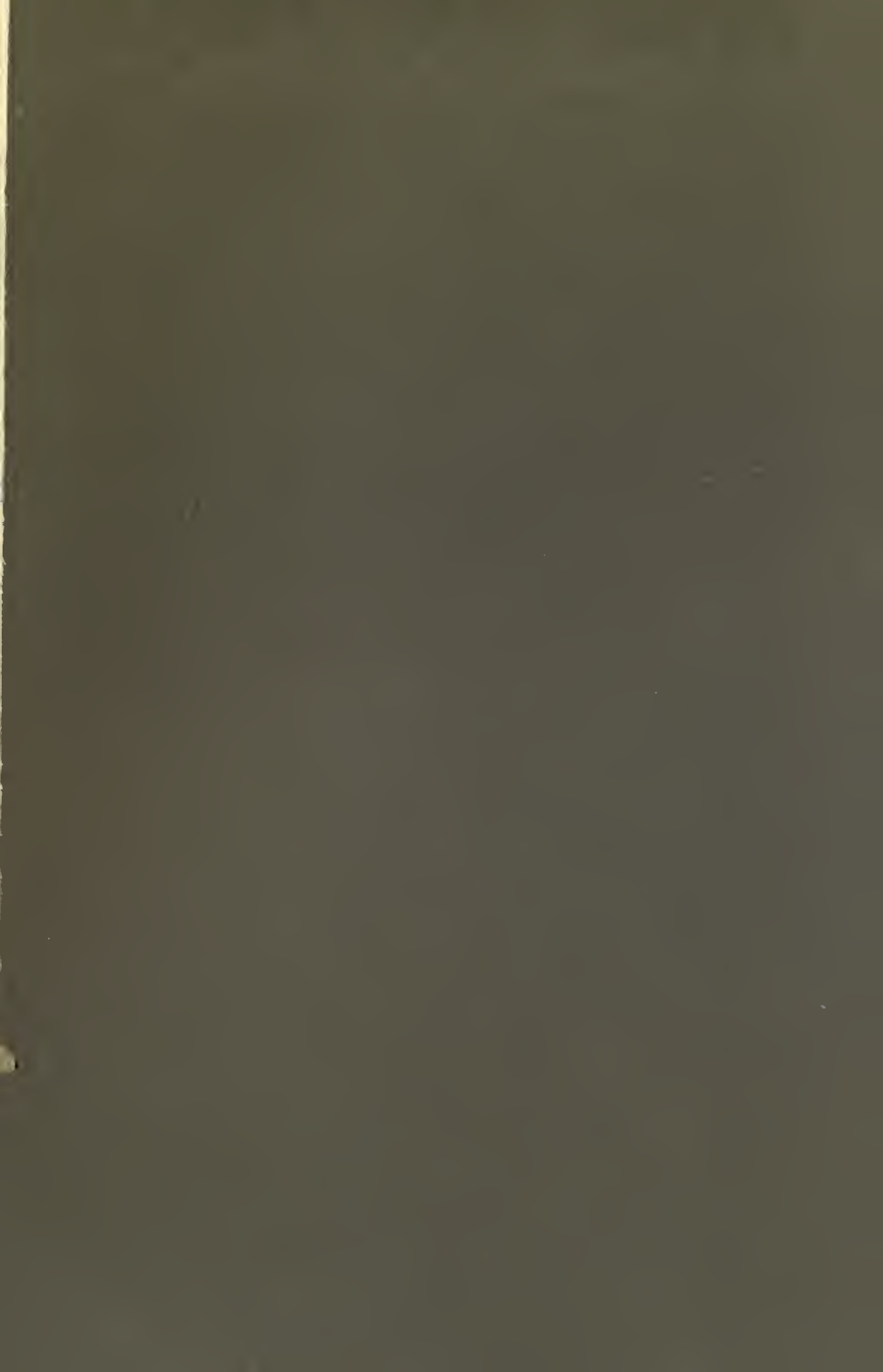
Unless kept up to date such special collections always deteriorate in usefulness. People will continue to write on Dante notwithstanding the wishes of collectors and cataloguers who are trying in vain to keep up with the subject. Readers and students will continue to want the latest word on this as on other topics. And so the mere possession of

such a treasure as Cornell has in its Dante Collection carries with it the responsibility of giving it attention and fostering care. But above all, the presence of these books should have a practical result in furthering the study of Dante and Italian literature at Cornell University. I not only believe that there is a healthy interest in Dante among the students and residents of Ithaca, but I also think that if properly stimulated this interest will be greatly increased by the presence of the superb Fiske Collection. Encouragement should be given to the study of Dante by yearly lectures, such as have been given for a dozen years or more at University College, London, and within the past few years at Florence and Milan under the auspices of the young and active Società Dantesca Italiana. Oxford not only has its Dante Society but can also claim for its own the profound scholar, Dr. Edward Moore, who has done so much for the more serious study of Dante in England. Recently the Dante Society of London has held public meetings for the discussion of questions connected with the subject, and under its auspices some of the foremost English students of Dante have given addresses. The English University Extension Society, through its most able and competent lecturer the Rev. Philip H. Wicksteed, has aroused a wide-spread interest in Dante by numerous courses of lectures given throughout England. The American University Extension Society has within the last year instituted a course of six lectures on the Divine Comedy, given by Prof. E. H. Griggs. The latter might well be invited to give these lectures at Cornell. Another year, perhaps, Prof. L. Oscar Kuhns of Wesleyan University, an enthusiastic student of Dante, might be prevailed upon to address an Ithaca audience. It is to be regretted that the dean of all American students of Dante, Prof. Charles Eliot Norton of Harvard, has already so many claims upon his time that, owing to the distance of Ithaca from Cambridge, we can hardly hope to be favored with a hearing of his lectures on Dante delivered on the Turnbull foundation at Johns Hopkins University.

It is interesting in this connection to read the quaint memorial addressed to the priors of Florence, half a century after the death of Dante, petitioning for the establishment of the chair to which Boccaccio was the first to be appointed. The document, dated August 21, 1373, begins thus: "In behalf of many citizens of the city of Florence, desirous as much for themselves as for other citizens aspiring to virtues, as well as for their children and descendants, to be instructed in the book of Dante,—alike for the resulting disinclination towards vice and the acquisition of virtue,—they respectfully petition your excellencies to deign to provide, as you may elect, one worthy and learned man, well-informed in the knowledge of this kind of poetry, for such time as you will, not more than one year, to read in the city to all who may wish to hear, the book which is popularly called *The Dante*."

It might be well for Cornellians and Ithacans similarly interested in Dante to petition the University Trustees to provide for some public exposition of the poet's life and work. The experiment need not be costly and if unsuccessful could be readily discontinued. The University now owns much suitable material for an interesting and instructive Dante exhibit which might be held during the term of the lectures. Such an exhibit would make the undergraduates more familiar with the collection than can be ordinarily expected when these treasures are stored away in a stack to which they do not have access.

Theodore Wesley Koch.



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